



John Locke

# John Locke and the Social Contract

Reading Passage  
for Chapter 1 Test  
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The Americans who founded the United States thought a good deal about the state of nature, the place where natural law prevailed. The state of nature was a mythic landscape philosophers had invented to help them think about what was real about the human condition. It was a way of stripping life down to its bare essentials to see which qualities people were born with and which qualities were the product of civilization.

No one was more influential in mapping the features of the state of nature than the British philosopher John Locke (1632-1704). Locke reasoned that all men were born free and equal, their freedom the gift of God. They had enjoyed this liberty and equality in the state of nature which had come before human societies. The most basic of human rights are life, liberty and property—the ability to earn and hold on to possessions. Humans are not equal in all ways: Some surpass their fellows in strength or intelligence, but all are equally entitled to these natural rights.

However, because people were not equal in their strengths, the state of nature was a dangerous and uncertain condition. Long ago, people had created society for their protection. They had agreed to some limits on their freedom and equality in order to promote their safety and to protect their property. This agreement was the social contract.

The social contract theory had revolutionary implications. Governments had been formed by the consent of the governed for their own benefit. Each member had given up some measure of freedom in return for safety. If the people created government voluntarily and for these purposes, it was reasonable to expect that they also had the right to "... alter or abolish it, and to institute a new government, laying its foundation on such principles ... as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness ...."

Under the social contract, government is a kind of trust. If government broke the agreement it was tyranny. For the governed to abolish a tyrannical government and form a new one was a sacred duty. Thomas Jefferson, who used Locke's ideas so freely in the Declaration of Independence, had a motto that spoke of that duty. "Rebellion to Tyrants," it read, "is Obedience to God."

## An Essay concerning toleration 1667

In the Question of liberty of conscience, which has for some years been so much bandied among us. One time that both parties perplexd the question, kept up the dispute, & increased the animosity, both sides conceiving that both parties have with equal zeal, & perhaps too much enlarged their pretensions, whilst one side preach up absolute tolerance, & the other claime universall liberty in matters of conscience, without assignning what those things are w<sup>ch</sup> have a right to liberty or showing the boundaries of imposition & obedience.

I shall say down the  
To cleare the way to lay for a foundation, w<sup>ch</sup> I thinke will not be questiond or denied viz. ~~the~~ <sup>the</sup> effect

That the whole trust power & authority of the magistrats is vested in him for not other purpose but to be made use of for the good preservation & peace of men in that society over w<sup>ch</sup> he is set. It therefore that his alone ~~is~~ <sup>is</sup> ought to be the standard & measure according to w<sup>ch</sup> he ought to square & proportion his laws, model & frame his government. For if men could live peaceably & quietly w<sup>th</sup> out any <sup>governing</sup> ~~governing~~ <sup>under any government</sup> without forming into a commonwealth, there would be no need at all of magistrats.